**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Gertrude**

SP’s presentation of Gertrude has never attracted much favourable comment.

The Queen appears to be very dull and very shallow.

Her great anxiety seems to be to avoid trouble at any cost, to preserve herself from any disturbance of the smooth currents of her existence.

Her early request to Hamlet to cast off his mourning clothes and to look on Claudius as a friend is typical enough of her gentle attitude.

A certain ambiguity surrounds SP’s conception of her past conduct, and, consequently, of her present state of mind.

The main point at issue here is the extent of her complicity in the crime committed by Claudius, and the nature of her relationship with him before her first husband’s death.

**What is her Sin?**

The queen of the Dumb-Show is guilty neither of conniving at murder nor of adultery.

Against this, in the Closet scene, Hamlet goes even further than the Ghost in his accusations.

Gertrude describes the killing of Polonius as a bloody deed. Hamlet replies:

A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother,

As kill a king and marry with his brother. (3:4, 29-30)

The tone of astonishment in her reply, “As kill a king?” appears unfeigned, and seems to exonerate her from complicity in the murder.

Hamlet’s subsequent anger seems to have its origin in his disgust at her hasty marriage in middle age to a man he thinks totally inferior to her previous husband.

As to her relationship with Claudius, the evidence of the play seems to leave only two possibilities: either that Gertrude was unfaithful to her husband while he lived, or that her only offence is to have been unfaithful to his memory.

There is a further complication, which bears on the various references by the Ghost and Hamlet to the Claudius – Gertrude relationship as “incestuous”.

Marrying Claudius , Gertrude would have been seen by SP’s audience, in the way she is seen by Hamlet, as having committed incest, since the marriage id a man to his deceased brother’s wife was a gross breach of contemporary ecclesiastical law, and technically incestuous.

Whatever may be the thought on SP’s apparent lack of interest in Gertrude’s personality, there can be no doubt that her “sin”, whatever its real nature, is the dominant influence on Hamlet’s attitude to life for much of the play.

At times, this takes precedence for him over his obligation to avenge his father’s death.

Some of his most powerful utterances are inspired by disgust at his mother’s conduct, despite the Ghost’s injunction to “leave her to heaven”.

This disgust takes on a universal application: Gertrude’s taint extends to all women, even Ophelia, and colours Hamlet’s attitude to the young woman. He is thinking of the corruption of his own relationship with Ophelia, as well as of his mother’s guilt, when he charges the latter with:

Such an act

That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,

Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose

From the fair forehead of an innocent love

And sets a blister there, makes marriage-vows

As false as dicers’ oaths... (3:4, 41-6)

Here it seems that Hamlet has both adultery and incest in mind.

There is much to recommend the view that Hamlet is overwhelmed even by Gertrude’s remarriage.

His despairing soliloquy “O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt”, which is dominated by bitter reflections on her disloyalty, comes at a stage in the play when he has yet to hear the Ghost’s more damaging indictment.

There are some suggestions that Hamlet’s vehement exhortations in the Closet scene stir feelings of guilt in Gertrude make her conscious of the falseness of her position in relation to Claudius, and of her past infamy. (3:4, 89-2)

Later, we have her telling references to her “sick soul” and to “sin’s true nature”.

There is, however, no need to see her sensitive account of Ophelia’s death as an indication that the better part of her nature is beginning to prevail.